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A NEW COMMUNICATION ORDER

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KEY WORDS

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A NEW COMMUNICATION ORDER

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of a new century, many English teachers are looking for models that offer strategies for teaching effectively in a context of rapid social and cultural change, much of which is mediated by the new technologies. Some English teachers are beginning to acknowledge the need to learn how to use a range of new technologies that allows for an expanded network of communication and intellectual exchange. At the same time, some feel a degree of inadequacy and lack of preparedness for the challenges of the task. They are the product of a print generation: they were shaped, perhaps limited, by print-based understandings of literacy. They do not feel altogether at ease in virtual environments and are still grappling with the demands of a society that is more and more dependent on computer technology for literacy activities.

Many English teachers are also looking for models that offer strategies to teach students what they need to know. Of course, trying to work out just what it is that students need to know in the context of subject English continues to be difficult - even more so in a postmodern world in which there is no longer the illusion of a stable, unchanging, identifiable body of knowledge that teachers believe students should be exposed to. But whatever English teachers decide it is that students need to learn to participate actively, productively and ethically in their lives beyond school, it calls for the intelligent and informed integration of the use of the new information and communication technologies.

To achieve the broad goal of literacy education – to produce students who are prepared to contribute actively, critically and responsibly to a changing society - English teachers are beginning to take account of the complex ways in which the use of information and communication technologies influences, shapes, perhaps transforms, literacy practices; they are beginning to consider the best ways to integrate the use of the new technologies into curriculum and pedagogy. As teachers come to understand the changes and acknowledge issues of technology in their work, they will learn how to use the new technologies well with a view to tapping their educational potential.

The focus of this paper is the new communication order. After a discussion of some of its features, the implications of the new order for English curriculum and pedagogy are considered. The next section makes a number of suggestions about the directions research might take to further understanding of the new order. The chapter concludes with the proposition that if we really are witnessing the emergence of a new communication order, then the term 'communication practices' might be more useful for English teachers than 'literacy practices' as it is less tainted by reductive interpretations and, perhaps, theoretically more generative. Indeed, adopting the term 'communication practices' might even be a politically strategic move. By advocating new terms for public debate, the profession might usurp control of the agenda from the politicians, bureaucrats, policy makers and administrators for whom educational objectives are often compromised by imperatives such as resourcing and markets. Most importantly, it might prove to be an important symbolic gesture. If English teachers are seen to be actively engaged in the business of identifying, interrogating and explaining the features of the new communication order within which technology is integral, then their customary characterisation as the group of teachers least likely to be involved in technological change might be appropriately debunked.

FEATURES OF THE NEW COMMUNICATION ORDER

Increasingly, attention in the field of literacy studies has been directed towards the understanding that there is a need to move beyond narrowly defined accounts of literacy to ones that capture the complexity of real literacy practices in contemporary society. Literacy needs to be conceived within a broader social order, what Street and others have called a 'new communicative order' (Street, 1998; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Lankshear, 1997). The emergence of this new order is directly associated with the development of an electronic communication system characterised by 'its global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity' (Castells, 1996: 329).

In particular, this new communication order takes account of the literacy practices associated with screen-based technologies – what is widely known as computer-mediated communication. It recognises that reading and writing practices, conceived traditionally as print-based and logocentric, are only part of what people have to learn to be literate. Now, for the first time in history, the written, oral and audiovisual modalities of human communication are integrated into the same electronic system – multimodal hypertext systems made accessible via the Internet and the World Wide Web. Being literate in the context of these technologies is to do with understanding how the different modalities are combined in complex ways to create meaning.

As the Internet and the Web provide access to these multimodal systems, they are integral to the new communication order. The Internet is a complex system of networked computers that can convey all kinds of messages – including sound, images and data. And within the global communication networks provided by the Internet, the World Wide Web offers a flexible network of networks 'where institutions, businesses, associations and individuals create their own "sites" on the basis of which everybody with access can produce their own "home page" made of a variable collage of text and images' (Castells, 1996: 355).

The use of the Internet and the Web has significant implications for communication practices noticeable in a number of domains (Snyder, 1997). Social relations are considerably affected, as in email, online discussion groups and chat rooms. More specifically, class, race and gender relations are affected. For example, it seems that women and members of non-white male middleclass groups are more likely to express themselves openly through the protection of the electronic medium. Some argue that computer-mediated communication could offer a chance to reverse traditional power relationships in communication practices. Others argue that there is enough accumulated knowledge about the social uses of technology to know that time after time people adapt the new technology to meet their needs. Rather than creating radically new patterns of social practice, computer-mediated communication is more likely to reinforce existing patterns (McConaghy & Snyder, 2000). It seems that further exploration of these complex issues is required.

In the new structures of communication, the social practices related to work, education, home and entertainment are becoming increasingly blurred. It seems that progressively, the computer will connect work, education, home and entertainment, which were once more or less discrete domains of social practice, into the same system of communication. Although, as in all areas of social practice, context is pivotal in determining the uses of the computer, this convergence of experience in the same medium is blurring the institutional separation of domains of activity. A further consequence may be that codes of social behaviour will become more hybridised. Perhaps they will become more confused (Castells, 1996). But whatever the impact, it is clear that under the new communication regime, the main social institutions are beginning to articulate with each other in very complex ways. This poses dilemmas for English teachers and for students in current school settings. To what extent will work, home, school and entertainment all be connected into the same system of symbol processing? To what extent does the particular context determine the perceptions and uses of the medium? Of course, these dilemmas need to be understood and resolved if literacy education is to serve the young people of today and tomorrow.

The turn to the visual' also represents a significant change associated with computer-mediated communication to how meanings are made. Because the technologies are better adapted to the visual than to the verbal mode, 'in a very real sense they promise an era in which the visual may again become dominant over the verbal' (Kress, 1995: 25). But the shift from verbal to visual language cannot be attributed only to the increased use of the new technologies: the shift has profound social and political causes such as changes to the global economy and the growth of multiculturalism/multilingualism. Indeed, 'the globalisation of mass media makes the visual a seemingly more accessible medium, certainly more accessible than any particular language' (Kress, 1995: 48). Visual language can move across cultural and linguistic distinctions with greater ease than verbal language. This is not to argue that images are devoid of cultural specificity. Rather, the point is that in many situations, visual communication is more likely to be effective than verbal.

Probably the most significant feature of the new communication order is that all kinds of messages are communicated within the same hypertext or multimedia system: there is no longer a clear separation between audiovisual media and printed media, popular culture and high culture, entertainment and education, information and knowledge. Everything comes together in this electronic world. What is created is a 'multifaceted semantic context made of a random mixture of various meanings' (Castells, 1996: 371). This is the complex communication landscape – the new communication order - that provides the context in which English teachers establish their curriculum and pedagogical goals.

As computing power increases, the potential of multimodal communication is accelerating. Without doubt there are possible benefits for education and there are many advocates for the wiring of schools. The reality, however, is a communication system that is predominantly dedicated to the construction of access to commercial sites. Business interests have controlled the first stages of the development of multimedia, despite the dreams of visionaries such as Ted Nelson who, in the mid-60s, imagined a time when all the 'texts' in the world would be available electronically to all people in all places (Nelson, 1992; Snyder, 1996). Such dreams of democratising access to information and enhancing education aside, it may be that these early uses of the technologies for commercial purposes will shape the social possibilities of the new communication media for the future thereby limiting their educational usefulness.

However, even if their educational potential is constrained, some English teachers are acknowledging the need to interrogate the emergent hybrid forms in which verbal and visual modes of representation are combined in new ways. On the whole, the kind of multimodality made possible by the new communication system has been culturally overlooked. The new texts are often approached through ways of seeing conceived in an older mode of communication. People of a certain age, who are products of a print generation, have been shaped by print-based understandings of literacy. Unlike the younger generation, they do not feel altogether at ease in virtual environments. For them, images are more often than not thought of as illustrations - even when they fill the entire page or screen and constitute the major mode of communication (Kress, 1997a; Snyder,

2001). By contrast, young people who regularly use the Web have a different understanding of images.

Theoretical work that begins to examine facets of multimodality provides useful frameworks within which English teachers might consider the cultural significance of the new media. In the book, Remediation: Understanding New Media, Bolter and Grusin (1999) present their theory of 'remediation' which offers an explanation of the complex ways in which old and new media interact. They contend that the new media achieve their cultural significance by paying homage to, rivalling and refashioning earlier media such as perspective painting, photography, film and television. They call this process of refashioning 'remediation' and note that earlier media have also refashioned one another: photography remediated painting, film remediated stage production and photography, and television remediated film, vaudeville and radio. Accessing audiovisual, news, education and entertainment shows on the same medium even from different sources blurs the distinctions between the contexts in which each originated.

Overall, Bolter and Grusin's (1999) theory of remediation provides a contrast with the claims initially made for hypertext / multimedia – that its use would fundamentally change learners' reading and writing practices and education systems (Burbules & Callister, 1996; Snyder, 1996; Landow, 1997). They argue that the new media draw on established media practices, incorporating and refashioning them, rather than radically transforming them. In many ways, they build on McLuhan's (1964) observation that older media end up becoming the content of newer ones. Indeed, the sub-title of their book – Understanding New Media - pays homage to McLuhan's 1964 title: Understanding Media.

Both positions have their own appeal. Each raises interesting questions for English teachers. How revolutionary are computer-mediated communication practices? Is it the dawn of a new literacy regime or the reshaping of an old one? What precisely is radically different about the new practices? Which practices are extensions of old and familiar ways of doing and seeing the world? Which are entirely new? Reconciling the approaches is not necessary; indeed, the tension between them might provide English

teachers with a catalyst for a theoretically generative engagement with some provocative ideas about revolution and continuity, about change and stability, about dissonance and stasis.

In the new communication order, where words, images and sound all play an important role, there is a need to take account of the whole range of communication practices and competencies and to their interconnections and interdependence. People are now required to link communication practices from one domain such as print-based literacy with those of another such as visual images. The implications for English education is that teachers should be attending to the whole spectrum of communication practices and communicative competence including the skills involved in relating them to each other and this is beginning to happen.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGOICAL PRACTICES

As Street has pointed out, English teachers are now part of 'a new communicative order' (1998). Drawing on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and Lankshear (1997), Street suggests that what characterises the new order is a mix of text and images. To prepare students to participate effectively in this new order, English teachers need to be aware of the semiotic range implicit in a variety of communicative practices. They need to conceive the English curriculum in terms of a broad framework that takes account of a wide range of communication practices. For without doubt, to be well educated students will have to understand more than do they at present about the communicative choices available to use, and about which media and which forms are more appropriate at a particular moment.

Within this broad curriculum framework, a number of things are essential. It is likely that writing will remain an important medium of communication, indeed culturally the most valued form of communication. However, it also likely that writing will become increasingly the medium used by and for the power elites of society (Kress, 1997b). Issues of equal access to power and its use make it essential therefore to ensure that all

students have the opportunity to achieve the highest level of competence in this mode: print and writing must not be side-lined.

At the same time, it is also evident that other forms of communication are becoming prominent. The challenge for the designers of English curricula is how to deal with that fact. Students require opportunities to use a number of modes. They need to recognise that there are deep and long-term changes taking place which are essential to understand, and that the form of the changes offer possibilities and resources which are available for their own use as makers of texts. They also need to understand that the boundaries of generic form are breaking down: familiar genres are changing and new ones are emerging.

With the increased use and presence of multimodal texts, there will be a need for a broader repertoire of skills in the curriculum. Students will need to learn to ask certain questions about how multimodal texts function: What kinds of information are best handled through visual display? What are the available forms of visual display? What does each form permit the text-maker to communicate? What can the visual do that the verbal cannot? Are graphics and video as informative as, or even more informative than, verbal text? Is it possible to determine whether the image, the sound or the word is the principal carrier of meaning in the text? Can the assumption that the images are used to illustrate the main message which is conveyed in words continue? How do the words, pictures and sound interact to make meaning? How can ambiguities created by that interaction be identified and interpreted? What can be gained and lost in the shift from the verbal to the visual?

Understanding these multimodal texts requires an interdisciplinary range of methods of analysis. Reading and writing are only part of what students are going to have to learn in order to be able to communicate effectively in the future. They are also going to have to handle the kinds of icons and signs in computer displays with all their combinations of symbols, boundaries, pictures, words, text and images (Street, 1998). The challenge for English teachers is profound: as all media now interface in a manner both fascinating and perplexing, teachers have to find ways to make sense of the 'information bricolage'

(Burnett, 1996: 71), to work through the labyrinth of material with students to interpret its many different meanings and shifts in direction. This challenge is increasingly at the heart of English education.

RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

While acknowledging that the ideas included here are by no means exhaustive, this section presents a number of suggestions for research that should extend understanding of the new communication order. In the first instance, researchers should build on previous studies, adding to the growing knowledge base about the connections between literacy, technology and cultural form.

It would be salutary to concentrate on students who have grown up with the technologies. A longitudinal approach to the study of young people immersed in computer culture will yield new understandings of computer-mediated literacy practices. As students represent a different generation, one with a different relationship to computers and to print text, researchers must observe them, ask them questions, and listen to their responses.

There needs to be more research into how English departments and individual teachers integrate computers into curricula and how computers interact with the whole school curriculum. How does pedagogy change? Do teachers' expectations alter? What are the implications for teachers' professional development and for the training of preservice teachers?

The use of computers with Internet access in educational settings initiates a contextual change that alters the political, social and cultural structures of systems, but there is a need to look more closely at how. For example, issues of access and equity can no longer be ignored. Moran (1999) points out that those working in schools and universities know that there are the 'haves' and 'have nots' and that the situation seems to be getting worse. It is also widely understood that the overriding factor in determining who gets access and who does not is wealth: the per capita funding of a given school, college or university and the income level of the student's family / caregivers determine the likelihood that a given student will have access, at school and/or at home to the new technologies. Much of

Comber's (1997) research has focused on literacy, disadvantage and school education. The need for further research is manifest. Snyder and Angus (2000) have initiated a study of home and school technology-mediated communication practices in low socio-economic communities. Although the study is not placing greater value on schooled literacies, it recognises the power issues associated with access to standard linguistic and literacy conventions (Gee, 1996). The study aims to produce a textured, micro-account of the computer-mediated communication practices in which children engage that can explain the link between social factors and school success. The need for more research investigating the complex relationships between literacy, new technologies and disadvantage is manifest.

An important aspect of the new communication order requiring further investigation is the increasing dominance of images. As discussed earlier, changes to semiotic practices involve a greater and newer use of visual forms of representation in many domains of public communication; the turn to the visual represents a significant change to how meanings are made. The connections between verbal and visual modes of representation provoke a number of important research questions about the new literacy practices and formations associated with multimodal texts, which have important implications for curriculum and pedagogy. Research projects aimed at investigating the relationships between the verbal and the visual would also provide opportunities to examine at close hand new literacy practices in real contexts: to observe teachers and students, to discuss the emerging computer-mediated communication practices with them, and to apply to those practices understandings which draw on the work of theorists such as Bolter (1996, 1998), Kress (1997a, 1997b), Kress & van Leeuwen (1996), Lemke (1997), Reinking (1998) and Bolter and Grusin (1999).

'COMMUNICATION' RATHER THAN LITERACY PRACTICES

This paper has argued that the use of new information and communication technologies has significant implications for literacy practices (Lankshear & Snyder, 2000; Snyder, 1997, Snyder, 2001), so much so that a new communication order is emerging. If this is indeed the case, then it may be that within this new order the notion of 'literacy' is no

longer useful as it is too often inscribed with reductive and narrow meanings (Snyder, 1999). Street (1998: 10) believes that a possible bridge between more complex understandings of literacy and reductive ones can be derived from 'new approaches to language and literacy that treat them as social practices and as resources rather than as a set of rules formally and narrowly defined'. This suggestion is perfectly reasonable, however, 'selling' more sophisticated definitions has been largely unsuccessful. Unlike employers, media and governments persist in propounding narrowly defined notions of literacy and advocate as a solution to 'falling standards' and 'rising levels of illiteracy' quick-fix remedies to enhance achievement in isolation from authentic, meaningful contexts of use and practice.

Perhaps there is another solution. Rather than trying to invest old words with new meanings, why not promote a term free of historical baggage. Perhaps the time is right to abandon the notion of 'literacy practices' and use in its place 'communication practices'. The word 'communication' is strongly associated with media studies, but there is no reason why it can not be taken up productively by English teachers. Such a gesture might serve to avert people's endemic recourse to reductive notions of literacy. It might also serve to undermine the close association so often made between literacy and the printed word. Moreover, it might signal the need for enhancing understanding of the multimodal communication practices intrinsic to a future likely to be dominated by screen-based reading and writing practices, not print-based ones.

On the other hand, the suggestion to switch from one term to another – from 'literacy practices' to 'communication practices' - could be dismissed as somewhat flippant. For one, literacy theorists have fought long and hard to complicate notions of literacy. Further, the term communication implies the transfer of meaning from one party to another and in literacy studies, it isn't that simple. Clearly, there are many more functions of literacy besides 'communication'. Moreover, communication is a very broad term which could be taken to encompass other forms of human communication outside the field under discussion – for example, dance, music, prayer, ESP. It is also commonly applied to non-human systems, for example animal communication, roads, railways.

But in the final analysis, it doesn't really matter if this suggestion is taken seriously or not. What is important is that English teachers recognise that education is at a critical crossroad. Language and literacy educators have within their power the opportunity to shift their own and their students' beliefs and understandings about the new technologies – about their place in education as well as their wider cultural importance. And this process is now happening. As the new information and communication technologies are used more and more widely, language and literacy educators are beginning to think critically about their use and to provide their students with the skills to do likewise. They realise that if they dismiss information and communication technologies simply as new tools, using them to do what earlier technologies did, only faster and more efficiently, then they perpetuate acceptance of a limited notion of their cultural significance: they overlook the technologies' material bases and the expanding global economic dependence on them. Increasingly, they are acknowledging that when they present the technologies as both an important part of the cultural and communication landscape, and as a potentially valuable resource, they engender a realistic conception of the technologies' significance and of their own and their students' place in an information and knowledge-based society.

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